

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CHILDREN: MANY CHANGE SCHOOLS FREQUENTLY, HARMING THEIR EDUCATION

One-sixth of the nation's third graders—more than half a million children—have attended at least three different schools since starting first grade. Unless policymakers focus more on the needs of the children who are changing schools frequently—often poor, inner city, and with limited English skills—these children may continue to do poorly in math and reading and risk having to repeat grades. Local school districts typically provide little additional assistance to these children. The Education Department could help by developing strategies to provide all eligible children, including those who have switched schools frequently, access to federally funded Migrant Education and Chapter 1 services. Timely and comparable record systems are one way to help mobile children receive services. For example, a child's school records often take up to 6 weeks to arrive in a new school, and student records often differ from states and districts.

RESULTS IN BRIEF

One in six of the nation's children who are third-graders—over a half million—have changed schools frequently, attending at least three different schools since the beginning of first grade. Unless policymakers focus greater attention on the needs of children who have changed schools frequently—often low-income, inner city, migrant, and limited English proficient (LEP)—these children may continue to be low achieving in math and reading, as well as to repeat a grade. Local school districts generally provide little additional help to assist mobile children.

The Department of Education can play a role in helping mobile children to receive appropriate educational services in a timely manner. Specifically, the Department can develop strategies so that all eligible children, including those who have changed schools frequently, will have access to federally funded Migrant Education and Chapter 1 services. Children who have changed schools frequently are not as likely to receive services provided by the federal Migrant Education and Chapter 1 programs as children who have never changed schools.

Timely and comparable record systems could be one way to help mobile children receive services. A child's records often take 2 to 6 weeks to arrive in a new school, according to data collected by the California State Department of Education and others. Moreover, student records often are not comparable across states and districts. The federal Migrant Student Record Transfer System (MSRTS), established to transfer information from a migrant child's former school district to a new school district, also does not provide timely and complete information. However, other systems, such as one currently being piloted in a few states, may in the future provide comparable and more timely transfer of student records for all children, including migrants.

CONCLUSIONS

Children who change schools frequently face many challenges to their success in school. Such change can cause disruption and add to the other challenges—low-income, limited English proficiency, and migrant status—that make learning and achievement difficult for them. Nevertheless, many of the children who change schools frequently may be less likely to receive Migrant Education and Chapter 1 programs services than other children meeting program eligibility standards.

LOW-INCOME, INNER CITY, MIGRANT, AND LEP CHILDREN ARE MORE LIKELY TO HAVE CHANGED SCHOOLS FREQUENTLY

Children who are from low-income families or attend inner city schools are more likely than others to have changed schools frequently. Overall, about 17 percent of all third-graders—more than a half million—have changed schools frequently, attending three or more schools since first grade. Of third-graders from low-income families—that is, with incomes below \$10,000—30 percent have changed schools frequently, compared with about 10 percent from families with incomes of \$25,000 and above. About 25 percent of third-graders in inner city schools have changed schools frequently, compared with about 15 percent of third-graders in rural or suburban schools.

An inner city child, compared with one in a suburban or rural school, may be more likely to change schools frequently, in part, because he or she is more likely to come from a low-income family. Another factor that could contribute to an inner city child changing schools is that such a child may move only a short distance, yet move into a new school attendance area; however, a child in a larger, less densely populated school attendance area—for example, in a suburban or rural school district—may move several miles and still attend the same school.

Migrant and LEP children also are much more likely than others to have changed schools frequently: about 40 percent of migrant children have changed schools frequently, compared with about 17 percent of all children. Among LEP children, about 34 percent have changed schools frequently.

CHILDREN WHO HAVE CHANGED SCHOOLS FREQUENTLY ARE MORE LIKELY TO BE LOW ACHIEVERS AND TO REPEAT A GRADE

Of the nation's third-graders who have changed schools frequently, 41 percent are low achievers, that is, below grade level, in reading, compared with 26 percent of third-graders who have never changed schools. Results are similar for math—33 percent of children who have changed schools frequently are below grade level, compared with 17 percent of those who have never changed schools. In grouping the children who have changed schools frequently into four income categories, we found that within each category, these children are more likely to be below grade level in reading and math than those who have never changed schools. Children who have moved often were also more likely to have behavioral problems, according to a recent study.

Overall, third-graders who have changed schools frequently are two-and-a-half times as likely to repeat a grade as third-graders who have never changed schools (20 versus 8 percent). For all income groups, children who have changed schools frequently are more likely to repeat a grade than children who have never changed schools.

Children who have changed schools frequently, compared with children who have never changed schools, are more than twice as likely to have nutrition and health or hygiene problems, according to teachers.

When children changed schools four or more times, both a Department of Education and a Denver Public Schools study found, they were more likely to drop out of school. Children who changed schools four or more times by eighth grade were at least four times more likely to drop out than those who remained in the same school; this is true even after taking into account the socio-economic status of a child's family, according to the Department study. Children who transferred within the district five or more times dropped out of school at similarly high rates, regardless of reading achievement scores, the Denver study found.

Except for migrant children, little is currently done to help children whose frequent school changes affect the continuity of their schooling. It may be difficult for teachers to focus on the needs of these children, particularly those who enter after school has started, rather than on maintaining continuity for the rest of the class. When children enter classrooms after the beginning of the year, teachers may prejudice them unfavorably. Teachers in schools with high proportions of children who change schools after the beginning of the year indicated that these school changes disrupt classroom instruction, and teachers must spend additional time on non-instructional tasks. Teachers may therefore not have the time to identify gaps in such a child's knowledge; moreover, these gaps may grow as the child is left on his or her own to make sense of the new curriculum and its relation to the one at the previous school. Children who changed schools often, except for migrant children, did not receive specialized educational services, researchers have noted.

MIGRANT CHILDREN WHO HAVE CHANGED SCHOOLS FREQUENTLY ARE LESS LIKELY THAN THOSE NOT CHANGING SCHOOLS TO RECEIVE MIGRANT EDUCATION PROGRAM SERVICES

Of migrant third-graders who have attended three or more schools since first grade, 21 percent receive migrant services, compared with 54 percent of migrants who have not changed schools at all. These results are surprising since the Migrant Education Act is intended to address, to a large degree, the problems mobility creates for migrant children. Migrant children who have changed schools frequently are less likely to attend schools with migrant education programs than those who have never changed schools.

CHAPTER 1 PARTICIPATION RATES LOWER FOR LOW-ACHIEVING CHILDREN WHO HAVE CHANGED SCHOOLS FREQUENTLY THAN FOR LOW-ACHIEVING CHILDREN WHO HAVE NEVER CHANGED SCHOOLS

Low-achieving children who have changed schools frequently are less likely to receive Chapter 1 services than low-achieving children who have never changed schools. Of third-graders who have never changed schools and read below grade level, 25 percent receive Chapter 1 reading services. In contrast, 20 percent of third-graders who have changed schools frequently and read below grade level receive these services. In grades kindergarten through 6, approximately 90,000 additional low-achieving children who have changed schools frequently could receive Chapter 1 reading services if the program provided these services at the same rates to these children as to low-achieving children who have never changed schools.

LACK OF CHAPTER 1 DATA TO EXPLAIN THE LOWER CHAPTER 1 PARTICIPATION RATES OF CHILDREN WHO HAVE CHANGED SCHOOLS FREQUENTLY

The Department of Education has little information on children who change schools frequently and their participation in the Chapter 1 program, as well as the effects that children moving frequently from school to school have had on Chapter 1 services. Therefore, we were unable to explain why low-achieving children who have changed schools frequently may be less likely to be served by Chapter 1 than low-achieving children who have never changed schools. A 1992 Department of Education policy instructs districts to reserve adequate funds so that migrant children who are eligible for Chapter 1 services—even if they arrive late in the school year—will receive them. But non-migrant children who change schools frequently and are also eligible for Chapter 1 services are omitted in this policy.